

# THE GUIDE TO PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Most graduate schools require a short essay usually called a “personal statement,” “statement of purpose,” or “letter of intent” as part of their admissions process. This document is central to the success of your application, so it’s worthwhile to spend some time composing and reviewing it.

First and foremost, an application statement is a writing sample, probably the longest one that the admissions committee will see. Whatever the specifics of your statement, focus on the quality of the writing, both at the level of composition (organization, transitions, logical presentation) and mechanics (spelling, grammar, punctuation). Use a persuasive, jargon-free writing style that is direct, concise, and concrete. Like any polished essay, you should plan to write several drafts and have it reviewed by at least one able critic.

Pay close attention to the instructions. Read prompts carefully, and respond fully. Bearing in mind that an admissions committee will read thousands of applications, give them exactly what they’ve asked for. They can only evaluate you if they can compare you to other candidates; your statement should tell them the same things about you that they know about other candidates, so they’re comparing apples to apples rather than oranges to apples. We assure you that there is room for creativity and originality within the confines of what is asked. You want your essay to stand out because of its excellence--and the excellent job it does of portraying you as a candidate.

Generally, personal statements should:

- Be persuasive. Make a strong argument that you are the applicant they should choose.
- Demonstrate how you fit into the program you are applying to specifically and how the program fits your goals. Discuss your interest in the school concretely, revealing your knowledge of the institution.
- Show experience, motivation, and the ability to succeed.
- Explain your purpose for pursuing graduate study. Briefly connect your future degree to your greater career goals.
- Address any issues in your record. Put them in a positive light to show how you’ve overcome a challenge.

There are some clichés you can avoid:

- Do not state that studying your subject is “what I wanted to do.” Instead, show rather than tell: provide concrete evidence of your interest and what you’ve done to pursue it already.
- Avoid listing achievements in a way little distinct from your resume or CV. Illuminate and deepen the reader’s understanding of your accomplishments.
- Never lecture the reader on your field of interest. Rest assured that they, admissions professionals or scholars in your future field of study, know enough about it to judge your application.

## FOR PROFESSIONAL DEGREES (M.D., M.B.A., J.D., M.S.W., M.ED.)

Your application is evaluated by an admissions department made up of counselors whose principal work is to create a large entering class by weighing individual qualifications and institutional needs. With faculty and other administrative input in defining their aims, they often times take diversity in various forms, geographical distribution, and interests of candidates into consideration in addition to test score, GPAs, and academic records.

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## FOR RESEARCH DEGREES (PH.D. AND NON-PROFESSIONAL MASTER'S DEGREE)

For research degrees, the kind of statement you will be asked for is distinct from the kind requested for professional degrees. In your case, your application goes to an admissions committee made up of faculty in the department to which you are applying. You will be evaluated not only on your intellectual capability and training but also on the way in which your scholarly interests dovetail with those of specific faculty members. Ultimately the admitting faculty selects graduate students, particularly at the doctoral-level, as apprentices and junior collaborators. In these cases, fit is as important as educational accomplishments. Defining your interests precisely suggests the depth of your engagement with your field of study and the quality of your undergraduate training. Draw on faculty in your current major to help you figure out what interests you and where you should apply. Your tone and what you choose to include should suggest that you are already thinking like a researcher; showing personality and describing motivation should be kept to a minimum.